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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MANILA 001696

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [MOPS](#) [PINS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [RP](#)
SUBJECT: LOCAL ELECTIONS IN MUSLIM MINDANAO IMPACT PEACE
PROCESS AND ELECTORAL REFORM

REF: A. MANILA 1460 (BROADCAST JOURNALIST FREED BY
KIDNAPPERS)
[1](#)B. MANILA 1399 (TOP BROADCAST JOURNALIST ABDUCTED
IN MINDANAO)

Classified By: Ambassador Kristie A. Kenney
for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) SUMMARY. Provincial and local elections in the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) elections are scheduled for August 11, even as an array of key Muslim groups urges that they be postponed until after the Philippine government signs a final peace agreement with Muslim insurgents that could significantly affect the size and governance of the ARMM. At stake are the positions of governor and vice-governor, as well as the 24 members of the unicameral Regional Legislative Assembly. About 70 percent of the 1.5 million registered voters in the ARMM are expected to troop to 1,903 poll precincts regionwide. Although previous ARMM elections have been marred by fraud and violence, this year's polls are expected to be more credible, given the Commission on Election's (COMELEC) unprecedented use of automation, and its close collaboration with law enforcement agencies. Civil society and religious groups have formed a regional coordinating council to actively monitor poll preparations and the promotion of higher voter awareness and participation in the process. Post is now drafting a plan for observing the elections that will include Embassy personnel and NGOs. The elections are important not only for the ARMM, but for the entire country, as they will serve as a dry run for the projected automation of the presidential elections in May 2010, which are expected to be automated.

[1](#)2. (C) Muslim insurgent leaders are concerned over President Arroyo's June 18 endorsement of incumbent ARMM Regional Governor Zaldy Ampatuan for re-election in the August 11 polls. A fresh three-year mandate for the Muslim political warlord could lock out competing Muslim groups from taking control of ARMM governance, and make it more difficult to implement a hoped-for peace settlement between the government and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). Consequently, some insurgent leaders are calling for a suspension of the elections to make way for the Mindanao peace process, while others plan to boycott the polls. Nonetheless, the Commission on Elections and Congress maintain publicly that it is determined to have the automated elections push through. END SUMMARY.

ELECTION PERIOD AND SEATS AT STAKE

[1](#)3. (U) By law, the ARMM elections are held every three years,

one year after the national elections, with this year's overall election period stretching from May 28 through September 10. The period for filing certificates of candidacy ended June 4 and the candidates may campaign until August 9. On election day, August 11, the polls are scheduled to open at 7:00 a.m. and close at 3:00 p.m. Counting of votes -- called "canvassing" -- begins at 6:00 p.m. and, because of automation, is projected to be completed within hours, rather than days, as was the case with manual counting. The winners -- to serve a three-year term beginning August 30 -- are expected to be proclaimed within 36 hours. All candidates have from August 12 through September 10 to file their statement of election expenses and contributions. Six candidates, including Indanan (Sulu) town mayor Alvarez Isnaji, an important Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) member recently accused of masterminding a high profile kidnapping for ransom, are challenging the re-election bid of incumbent Governor Zaldy Ampatuan, who has been endorsed by President Arroyo. Five candidates, including the incumbent, are vying for the vice governorship. There are 78 candidates for the 24-member Regional Legislative Assembly. The 24 seats are allocated among the six provinces comprising the region, as follows: Lanao del Sur, 6; Sulu, 6; Maguindanao, 3; Basilan, 3, Shariff Kabunsuan, 3, and Tawi-Tawi, 3.

LESS INTENSE POLITICAL RIVALRY, LESS VIOLENCE

14. (U) During the entire election period, a firearms ban is in place to minimize election-related violence. The

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government has also banned local leaders from organizing or maintaining a private army in an effort to lessen voter intimidation. The firearms ban is especially important in this region, where political clans stockpile weapons as a status symbol and for protection against political rivals. The COMELEC and the Philippine National Police have initially identified 400 "areas of concern" -- barangays with a higher potential for violence -- where more troops will be deployed. However, ARMM regional police director Joel Goltiao has observed that the political rivalry appears less intense for these elections and they could prove less violent than in previous years. COMELEC has also deputized the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police (PNP) to ensure that the elections proceed in a peaceful and orderly manner. COMELEC rules require the PNP and AFP to secure the election personnel, equipment, and paraphernalia, but prohibit them from positioning personnel near the polling precincts to protect voters against possible harassment or influence.

AUTOMATED POLLS, FINALLY

15. (U) Poll automation is expected to reduce electoral fraud, a perennial feature of Philippine elections. However, previous attempts to implement the project have been bogged down by legal questions on the equipment procurement process as well as the COMELEC's lack of decisiveness implementing poll automation. Under the watch of new Chairman Jose Melo -- who was appointed after his successful fact-finding investigation of extrajudicial killings in the country -- COMELEC will be using two new technologies, the optical mark reader (OMR), and the more expensive direct recording electronic (DRE) machines. The optical readers, to be used in all ARMM provinces except Maguindanao, will require voters to fill out the ballots, which then will be fed into scanning machines that tabulate results. The electronic machines -- to be used in Maguindanao because it has a better communications infrastructure -- will fully automate voting through the use of touch pads and touch-screen technologies. The direct recording electronic machines will also

electronically transmit results from the precinct to the provincial canvassing level. Automation is expected to speed up the election process and reduce opportunities for fraud -- such as vote padding, multiple voting, and ballot switching -- which were common under the manual system.

¶6. (U) Venezuelan firm Smartmatic and local partner Strategic Alliance Holdings Inc. will supply the direct recording electronic technology at a cost of P525 million (USD \$12 million), while American firm Avante International Technologies will provide the optical reader technology at a cost of P87 million (USD \$2 million). The COMELEC earlier contemplated retaining the manual system because of bidding time constraints, but Congress insisted on automation and relaxed the procurement rules. With these new technologies, Melo sees the elections as a dry-run for fully automated presidential polls in May 2010 and appears fully committed to see the project through. COMELEC has rolled out an education campaign to teach ARMM voters and election officials about the use of the new system, although public demonstrations using the new machines did not begin until July 1. COMELEC Chairman Melo described the computerization of the ARMM elections as a "learning process."

CIVIL SOCIETY AND RELIGIOUS GROUPS ON WATCH

¶7. (SBU) Cognizant of election fraud allegations in the ARMM region, particularly during the 2004 presidential elections, civil society and religious organizations are taking an active part in promoting clean and credible elections. The Church-based Parish Pastoral Council for Responsible Voting (PCRV), together with the Citizens CARE, Legal Network for Truthful Elections (LENTE), National Citizens Movement for Free Elections (NAMFREL), Bangsamoro Women Solidarity Forum, Bangsamoro Legal Network, Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society, and Bishop-Ulama Conference, have formed a regional coordinating council. They are closely monitoring the automation project, undertaking voter education campaign, and continuously mobilizing volunteers for poll watch duty. The coordinating council's convenor noted the need for more volunteers to enable poll watchdogs to have "the muscle to guard the elections" and monitor the entire process.

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USG ASSISTANCE AND MISSION OBSERVATION

¶8. (U) The USG supports electoral reform initiatives in the ARMM and is currently funding -- through the USAID -- the project Strengthening the Election process through Voter Education and Election Monitoring in the ARMM (SEPVEEM) Phase 12. The project -- to be implemented in 1,500 villages covering 80 municipalities and cities of the six ARMM provinces -- promotes participation and collaboration among election stakeholders in effecting meaningful electoral reforms. The Mission is currently organizing a multi-section and multi-agency team of volunteers to observe the ARMM elections. We expect three-person teams -- one American, one locally employed staff, and a security officer -- will cover various precincts in the ARMM, selected based on U.S. Embassy security requirements and COMELEC's list of approved safe areas for foreign observers. Locations will be reviewed by the Regional Security Office.

PRESIDENT ARROYO ENDORSES THE INCUMBENT GOVERNOR

¶9. (U) As had been expected, President Arroyo publicly endorsed incumbent Governor Zaldy Ampatuan's re-election bid at the June 18 regional caucus of the Lakas-Christian-Muslim-Democrat (Lakas-CMD) and Kampi parties

in Davao City. During her endorsement speech, Arroyo said, "I have no doubt that our candidates in the ARMM will win the election. This early, I ask you, Zaldy, to prepare your plan for a peace offensive centered on expanding the people's opportunities." Ampatuan and his father -- Maguindanao Governor Andal "Andy" Ampatuan -- are staunch loyalists of the Arroyo Administration, who delivered the vote during the May 2004 and May 2007 national elections. Consequently, Arroyo remains indebted to the Ampatuans as the Lakas-CMD and Kampi parties look ahead toward the 2010 national election. The top leadership posts, as well as 80 percent of the assembly seats, have in previous elections been won by administration candidates who are backed by well established political machinery and resources. Salic Ibrahim, chair of Citizens Coalition for ARMM Electoral Reforms (Citizens CARE) -- an umbrella organization of 25 ARMM-based NGOs -- noted that Malacanang's appointment "spells the difference" in the ARMM elections.

MNLF FIELDS CANDIDATE, MILF BOYCOTTS

¶10. (C) The Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) -- the formerly secessionist Muslim movement that forged a peace agreement with the government in 1996 and now wants to retake the ARMM leadership -- is fielding Indanan Mayor Alvarez Isnaji to challenge the re-election bid of Governor Ampatuan.

In view of Ampatuan's well financed political machine, and the legal charges recently filed against Isnaji over his alleged role in the June 8 kidnapping-for-ransom of broadcast journalist Ces Drilon and three others (ref a), MNLF leaders are urging the government to suspend the August 11 polls. Meanwhile, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) -- currently in peace talks with the government -- is concerned that the re-election of Ampatuan would delay the implementation of a negotiated peace settlement until after the next three year term in 2011. The MILF has a policy of "non-recognition and non-participation" in the poll exercise, and intends to boycott the ARMM election as in years past.

¶11. (U) While peace advocates want the elections postponed to allow the government more time to focus on the MILF peace talks, and the tripartite review of the 1996 MNLF final peace agreement, COMELEC and some influential Congressmen and Senators, including Deputy House Speaker Simeon Datumanong (a close relative of Zaldy Ampatuan) and Senate Minority leader Aquilino Q. Pimentel Jr., are determined to have the automated elections push through. In response to security problems on Jolo as military and police operations continue against suspected perpetrators of the June 8 kidnapping-for-ransom incident, Pimentel said that the elections may be suspended, but only in specific violence-prone areas. "The elections should go on," commented Pimentel.

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